

SOFTWARE

FAQ

Q Why can't I play games or use my 3D hardware in a virtual machine?

A As the name suggests, a virtual machine doesn't exist, but is rather a software emulation of the hardware a computer needs to run. It doesn't provide direct access to the hardware, but allows you to run multiple operating systems at the same time by sharing hardware through the virtual layer: the virtual machine software presents a virtual bit of hardware created in software and maps requests back to the real bit of hardware.

This works well for things such as hard disks and optical drives, where the software-to-hardware translation is fairly easy. For games, though, it's tricky. Graphics and games are very demanding applications and need direct access to the hardware to run at full speed, but the virtual software isn't quick enough to achieve this.

Virtual machines are usually presented only with a basic emulated graphics card, which provides enough power for simple 2D work, but not 3D. If you want to play games or use your 3D card for other work, you'll need to use a physical rather than a virtual machine.

David Ludlow
Deputy Editor



david@computershopper.co.uk

ADOBE Creative Suite 3

When Adobe acquired Macromedia in 2005, it became the undisputed leader in creative software. It already had the best image-editing, video-editing and desktop-publishing applications under its belt, and Macromedia's web-creation software provided the last piece of the jigsaw. Creative Suite 3 groups these applications together for the first time, bringing tighter integration and a better-value bundle, with prices around half that of buying applications separately.

One casualty is GoLive, Adobe's web-design application, which has been usurped by Dreamweaver. Adobe says GoLive will continue to be developed as a standalone product, but it seems keen for users to switch to Dreamweaver, which we recommend, too.

There are six Creative Suites in all. Prices vary depending on the retailer, so for simplicity all prices listed are from the Adobe website and include VAT.

Web Standard (£828) is the successor to Macromedia Studio 8. Studio 8 was an excellent bundle but Fireworks is no substitute for Photoshop. For this reason we're hesitant to recommend it. Web Premium (£1,404) more than compensates, adding Photoshop Extended, Illustrator and Acrobat Professional. Design Standard (£1,052) includes the applications relevant to print publishing, while Design Premium (£1,656) upgrades to Photoshop Extended and adds Flash Pro and Dreamweaver. With all the leading applications for print and web, it's an attractive proposition for anyone working in publishing. If we were to choose one stand-out bundle, this would be it.

The video-centric Production Premium (£1,656) replaces Production Studio Premium, with a new audio editor, SoundBooth, taking over from Audition. We're delighted to see that Flash Pro is now included, too; the web is an increasingly important medium for video distribution and Flash video is the dominant format. CS3 Master Collection (£2,314) is for those who must have everything. Upgrade options are manifold, but they essentially boil down to savings of around 55 per cent if you own an equivalent Adobe or Macromedia suite. Owning a single application may give you a small saving on a suite that includes it.

All the suites include a number of common elements. Adobe Bridge is a media-management utility that can serve as a file browser for any CS3 application. Its photo-management features are its

strongest asset, with the ability to sort by anything from date created to ISO speed. Support for web-related files is more basic, with no previews for HTML files. Keyword tagging is available for all file types and search options are extremely thorough, but it's not possible to assemble files from different folder locations into a single view. Bridge also incorporates Stock Photos and Photographers Directory, search facilities and shop fronts for 23 image libraries and thousands of photographers.

Device Central mimics the interfaces of a wide range of mobile phones to give a preview of how content will appear and behave, although some flaws still need ironing out. Version Cue is a server-based file-management system that helps up to 25 people collaborate using Photoshop, Illustrator, InDesign and Flash, but it doesn't work with Dreamweaver or the video-based applications.

One major benefit of the Creative Suites is how well their applications work together. Bridge and Version Cue make it easier to use the applications as part of a single workflow, and there are lots of other features that help in this respect. Premiere Pro, After Effects and Encore can import each other's native project files, which eliminates interim renders and keeps everything editable, and Photoshop PSD file support stretches throughout the applications.

Integration between the Adobe stalwarts and the applications acquired from Macromedia is less sophisticated, but there's limited ability to export from After Effects and Encore to Flash, for example. Flash Pro also has the same docked palettes as the latest versions of Photoshop, Illustrator and InDesign.

Ultimately, it's hard to rate these suites for value, as few design professionals would – or should – consider using anything else. Pick the Creative Suite that matches your needs, glance apologetically at your bank balance, and splash out.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

CREATIVE SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP SP2, Windows Vista Home Premium/Business/Ultimate/Enterprise (certified for 32-bit editions), Mac OS X 10.4.9
SUPPLIER www.adobe.co.uk
DETAILS www.adobe.co.uk



	WEB STANDARD	WEB PREMIUM	DESIGN STANDARD	DESIGN PREMIUM	PRODUCTION PREMIUM	MASTER COLLECTION
Rating	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Price (inc VAT)	£828	£1,404	£1,052	£1,656	£1,656	£2,314
InDesign	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓
Photoshop	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗
Photoshop Extended	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Illustrator	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Acrobat Professional	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
Flash Pro	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Dreamweaver	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓
Fireworks	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓
Contribute	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓
After Effects	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓
Premiere Pro	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓
Encore	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓
SoundBooth	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓
Upgrade price	£370	£535	£492	£704	£704	£1,902
Upgrade from*	MS, D+F	MS, CS	CS	MS, CS	PS	MS, CS, PS

*KEY: D+F = Dreamweaver and Flash/MS = Macromedia Studio MX or later/CS = Any Adobe Creative Suite/PS = Production Studio Standard/Premium

ADOBE InDesign CS3

★★★★★

£652 inc VAT

By rationalising the features that had accumulated in its predecessor, PageMaker, and its once dominant rival, QuarkXPress, and integrating creative options such as transparency and soft shadows, InDesign hauled desktop publishing (DTP) into the 21st century. This version develops those themes. The Object Effects dialog brings a full equivalent to Photoshop's Layer Styles, enabling bevels, glows, embosses and more. Still on the wish-list is the ability to apply effects to specific text characters.

InDesign's powerful handling of master pages and styles has been taken further. Nested styles can now loop; for example, a paragraph style for a list of items and prices can automatically alternate between two styles. Table and cell styles make it even easier to format data imported from text or Excel files. An intriguing new feature is text variables: a placeholder automatically fills with a copy of the first piece of text on that page, handy for dictionary-style page headers.

You can now import several text and/or image files at once. The Place cursor shows each in turn, and you click to place it. Other forms of automation

are also improved. Find/Change has been vastly expanded, enabling complex global replacements to text and graphics. Scripting is better than ever, with a choice of Visual Basic or JavaScript, and the latter can be compiled via the ExtendScript toolkit. You can script the production of layouts from XML content and export XHTML formatted by a linked CSS file, whether as a final product or to go to Dreamweaver. The focus on practical XML workflows is far superior to QuarkXPress's built-in web tools.

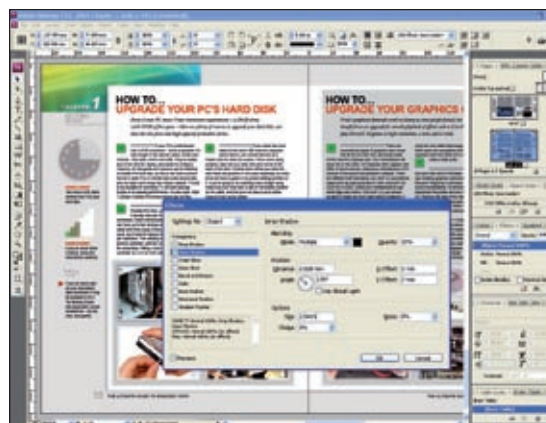
QuarkXPress 7's Composition Zones allow a document to contain elements edited as separate files by different users. Adobe has taken a simpler approach with the ability to place one InDesign document within another; like an image file, it's tracked in the Links palette and can be updated when it's changed.

The CS3 user interface suits InDesign well, with palette clutter initially banished. Keeping everything you need at hand can still be awkward, but it's all neat and usable. The page icons representing your document can now show thumbnails of the layouts, which is great.

SUMMARY

- ✓ More creative effects than ever
- ✓ Excellent automation enhancements
- ✗ No new type or imaging features

DESKTOP-PUBLISHING SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP/Vista, 512MB RAM, 1GB disk space
PART CODE 27510937
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.adobe.co.uk



▲ Transparency and soft shadows are among InDesign's best features, and Object Effects provide even more creative options

Instead of using tabs like QuarkXPress 7's Measurements palette, InDesign's Control panel shows all relevant options all the time. This is less confusing, but you'll need a large monitor to see all the tools. A Customize option lets you turn items on and off. Quick Apply has been expanded; click its lightning bolt icon or press Ctrl+Enter and you get a list of relevant styles and commands. To pick one, click it or type the first few letters of its name. This is a godsend if you prefer keyboard to mouse, and custom shortcuts are definable for every command.

There's little more we could ask of InDesign CS3. It would be nice to have more of Illustrator's drawing/warping tools and a few of Photoshop's basic image adjustments to save switching applications. That aside, this is a top upgrade to what's becoming the perfect layout tool.

Adam Banks

Also consider...

MICROSOFT Works Suite 2006

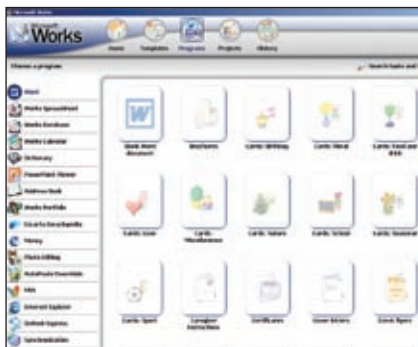
★★★★★

£43 inc VAT

Microsoft Office may be the obvious choice of office suite, but it's expensive for home users and is very business-focused. Microsoft has a more home-friendly range of software in Works Suite 2006, and all for well under £100.

The package contains Word, Digital Image Standard, Money, AutoRoute Essentials, Encarta and the organiser that glues them all together, Works. However, you get the older 2002 version of Word rather than the newer Word 2003. As the new version provides better security, more options for tracking document changes and mark-up features used to prepare content for professional databases, the presence of Word 2002 is a disappointment.

The other packages are well worth the money, though, and provide pretty much every function the average home user will need. Unless you intend to use your PC to run a small business, Works Suite is a stunning collection of software at a bargain price.



OFFICE SUITE Requires Windows 98 SE or later, 700MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 1.5GB disk space, Internet Explorer 6
PRODUCT CODE B11-01360 SUPPLIER www.dabs.com DETAILS www.microsoft.com/worksuite Includes Word and handy home software such as Encarta ✗ Old version of Word FULL REVIEW Mar 2006

ACRONIS True Image 10 Home

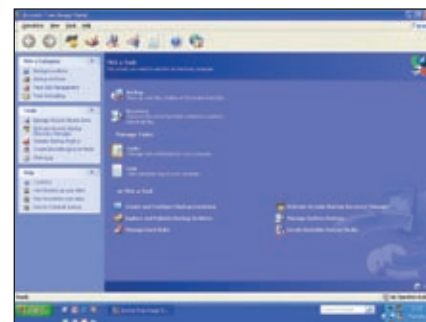
★★★★★

£24 inc VAT

BEST BUY True Image 10 from Acronis makes a complete copy of your PC's hard disk, operating system and all, so you can restore it to a working state easily.

It can make backups of folders and emails and even back up the settings of applications, providing you with everything you need to make sure your data is protected at all times.

IMAGING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000 and later, 133MHz processor, 128MB, 150MB disk space
PRODUCT CODE AT110 SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.acronis.com Easy to use ✗ Some features not that useful FULL REVIEW Apr 2007



ADOBE Photoshop CS3

★★★★★

£514 inc VAT

With more features crammed into each release of Photoshop, Adobe has finally drawn the line and split it into two versions: Photoshop Extended gains industry-specific tools such as 3D editing, 32-bit high dynamic range (HDR) imaging and scientific and medical measurement and analysis. Only Premium editions of CS3 include Photoshop Extended. This doesn't seem like a good thing; the division of features is arbitrary, and it would be a pity to see a great do-it-all application broken up for discrete target markets.

The new interface streamlines the familiar two-column toolbox into a single strip (you can put it back if you prefer). On the right, a neat column of palettes does away with the Palette Well but gains an extra strip of icons clinging to its left side, which expands into a second rank of panels. It's all customisable, but will take a bit of getting used to.

New to the toolbox is Quick Selection, yet another way to cut out an object from its background. Click anywhere and the 'dancing dots' pick out a surrounding area of similar colour; drag and the area expands. It's no miracle cure for difficult cutouts, but makes easy-to-moderate ones a lot

faster. All cutouts can be adjusted in the Refine Edge dialog, which usefully brings together existing ways to modify a selection – expanding or contracting, blurring or sharpening the edge – in one place with a live preview.

Photoshop's Adjustment Layers apply tweaks, such as Levels or Hue/Saturation, non-destructively, without changing the image pixels. Why not apply filters, such as Gaussian Blur or Ripple, in a similar way? CS3 sort of achieves this using an existing type of layer called a Smart Object. When you apply a filter to a Smart Object, CS3 creates a Smart Filter, which is an editable property of the layer. You can also apply a Smart Filter to an ordinary layer, but only if you first convert the layer to a Smart Object, which then prevents you accessing its existing properties, such as a mask or Layer Style, except by double-clicking to open it as a separate document. This is really too cumbersome.

There are welcome improvements to the Clone tool, which 'paints' one part of an image over another. The Clone Source panel lets you switch between five



▲ Photoshop's new Smart Filters are clever, but a broader implementation of filter layers remains an obvious wish-list item

clone sources, rotate the source content, and display a ghost image of the source. Some tasks previously addressed by cloning can now be tackled with Auto Align, which lines up a stack of shots of the same scene so you can mask the areas of one you want to replace with another, such as a person blinking in a group photo.

Raw image processing has been speeded up and you can import JPEG and TIFF images via the Camera Raw plug-in, so non-DSLR users needn't feel left out. If you're into 3D, engineering, manufacturing or medicine, check out the new Extended features at www.adobe.com/products/photoshop/photoshopextended.

Photoshop CS3 is still by far the best software of its kind, and has some interesting new features. But for an upgrade that was so long in the making, it isn't a blockbuster.

Adam Banks

SUMMARY

- ✓ Some handy new comping tools
- ✓ Neater, less screen-hungry interface
- ✗ Choice of versions will vex some users

GRAPHICS SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP/Vista, 512MB RAM, 1GB disk space
PART CODE 23102470

Also consider...

CLOUDMARK Desktop for Outlook

★★★★★

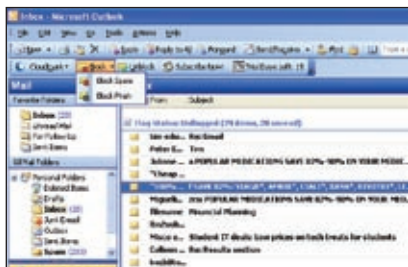
£24 inc VAT



Cloudmark Desktop is available for Outlook and Outlook Express. The software connects to a large database of spam messages maintained by other users, so it has a high probability of detecting spam. Any spam classifications you make are fed back into the database, improving Cloudmark's detection rates.

It was the clear winner of our anti-spam Labs test in *Shopper* December 2006.

ANTI-SPAM SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP, Outlook or Outlook Express SUPPLIER Cloudmark 020 7100 5224 DETAILS www.cloudmark.com ✓ Excellent anti-spam detection ✗ Outlook/Outlook Express users only FULL REVIEW Dec 2006



ADOBE Photoshop Lightroom 1.0

★★★★★

£129 inc VAT



Adobe's Lightroom is everything a digital camera enthusiast could want. It helps manage your images, process RAW files, correct colour, retouch and export to a range of media. It's brilliant to use and, although designed for professional photographers, a great choice for anyone with an expensive camera.

PHOTO-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP/Vista, Pentium 4 processor, 768MB RAM, 1GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE 19250102 SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.adobe.co.uk ✓ Powerful photo manipulation ✗ Basic noise reduction and sharpening FULL REVIEW Jul 2007



CAKEWALK Sonar 6 Producer Edition

★★★★★

£329 inc VAT



Sonar 6 is the best music-production software you can buy. Its professional-quality effects and instruments go way beyond those of the competition. Other packages will appeal to certain niche groups, but if you want the best of everything Sonar still rules the roost.

MUSIC-PRODUCTION SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP, 1.3GHz processor, 256MB RAM, 1.5GB disk space
SUPPLIER www.dolphinmusic.co.uk DETAILS www.cakewalk.com ✓ Comprehensive audio suite ✗ AudioSnap doesn't live up to expectations FULL REVIEW Mar 2007



ADOBE After Effects CS3 Professional

★★★★★

£1,033 inc VAT

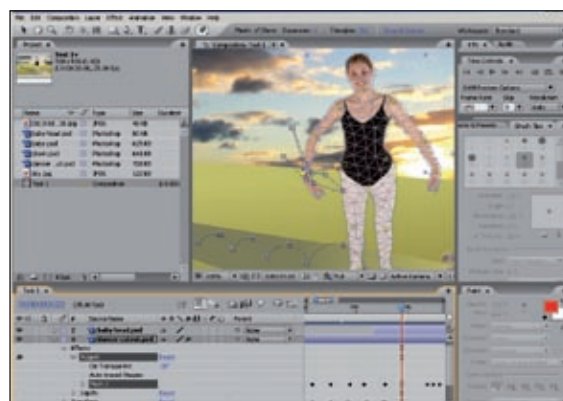
After Effects is Photoshop for moving images. It specialises in animations and complex video effects, often combining lots of discrete objects. Features such as randomisers and particle generators separate it from general-purpose video-editing software. Adobe has dispensed with the Standard version for this release, which means that £1,033 is now the starting price for After Effects. However, there's little point in buying it by itself, as Creative Suite 3 Production Premium (£1,656 including VAT) bundles it with Photoshop Extended, Premiere Pro, Illustrator and Flash Pro.

The Puppet tool is a brand new feature for animating bitmaps. It's ostensibly designed for character animation, and works by creating pins at the joints in a character and using keyframes to animate their position. It's delightfully easy to use, and movement ripples through characters in a fairly convincing manner. However, it knows nothing about anatomy, so when moving an elbow, the wrist stays locked in position. The Puppet Starch Tool can add some rigidity to specific parts of an image, but only with limited success. Ultimately, it's no substitute for dedicated

character animation software, such as E Frontier Poser, which uses 3D models of people that move in anatomically correct ways (and costs around £120). However, the Puppet tool has a certain cartoon-like charm of its own, and can also be applied to other, non-human bitmaps. When combined with After Effects' Expression commands we were able to add internal motion to bitmaps, keeping tight control over how each part moved.

The other major new creative tool is vector drawing. It's based on the same Pen tool and Bézier curves used for creating masks in previous versions, but when they're used to create a Shape Layer, an outline and fill, including gradient fills with variable opacity, is available. It won't put Illustrator out of business, but the ability to animate any parameter is extremely welcome, particularly for credits sequences and DVD menu design.

You can now animate 3D text by individual word or character. There are lots of presets to show off the new capabilities, which add greatly to After Effects'



▲ After Effects' new Puppet tool has some interesting creative uses, but photo-realistic character animation isn't one of them

impressive aptitude for dramatic titles. However, from here on in, the new features are a little underwhelming. Brainstorm is the overly grand name for a tool that previews settings at different values side by side. Integration with Flash is heralded as a major new feature, but we found it to be of limited use, either ignoring non-compatible features (which is most if them) or rendering each frame as a rasterised JPEG.

Our biggest disappointment was that we experienced quite a few crashes. We could usually save our work before quitting, but not always. We hope that updates will improve matters. Still, it's hard to feel down about After Effects because, despite its foibles, it's flexible, precise, great fun to use and produces spectacular results. For video producers considering the CS3 Production Premium bundle, it's enough to sway the decision.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Exciting creative tools
- ✓ Precise but still fun to use
- ✗ Unstable in our tests

VIDEO-COMPOSITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP/Vista, 512MB RAM, 1GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE 25510602
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.adobe.co.uk

Also consider...

ROXIO Easy Media Creator 9 Suite

★★★★★

£33 inc VAT

PRICE CUT!

BEST BUY This suite comes with all the media-editing tools you'll ever need. Its greatest strengths are its tight integration between all the modules and its friendly, task-oriented interface. With capable editing tools, it's great value and the best media suite you can buy, although there's not enough difference to warrant upgrading.

MEDIA SUITE Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 1GB disk space PRODUCT CODE 227000UK
SUPPLIER www.ebuyer.com DETAILS www.scan.co.uk
✓ Excellent media-editing tools ✗ Little reason to upgrade from Creator 8 FULL REVIEW Jan 2007



AVANQUEST RadioTracker 2

★★★★★

£20 inc VAT



BEST BUY RadioTracker 2 makes finding new music easy by downloading tracks automatically from internet radio stations. Simply select the genre of music you like and the software does the rest. A new feature enables you to pick specific tracks you want – the simple way to find a rarely heard classic.

MP3 DOWNLOAD SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP, 128MB RAM, 500MHz processor, 100MB disk space
SUPPLIER <http://shop.avanquest.com> DETAILS www.avanquest.com ✓ Downloads the music you want ✗ Can't delete unwanted tracks easily FULL REVIEW Feb 2007



STEGANOS AntiVirus 2007

★★★★★

£20 inc VAT



BEST BUY Steganos AntiVirus uses software from Kaspersky, so you get the best anti-virus protection money can buy for a lot less money. In our recent Labs test (Shopper April 2007), it beat every other anti-virus application hands down. For Windows Vista, you'll have to buy Kaspersky Anti-Virus 6, as Steganos doesn't currently support Vista.

ANTI-VIRUS SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98 or later, 300MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 50MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.steganos.co.uk DETAILS www.steganos.co.uk
✓ Powerful protection against viruses ✗ Not compatible with Windows Vista FULL REVIEW Apr 2007



ADOBE Dreamweaver CS3

★★★★★

£350 inc VAT

CS3 is the first version of Dreamweaver released since it passed from Macromedia to Adobe. Adobe hasn't changed its price significantly. Users of the last three versions published by Macromedia (Dreamweaver 8, MX 2004 and MX) can upgrade for around £165 including VAT.

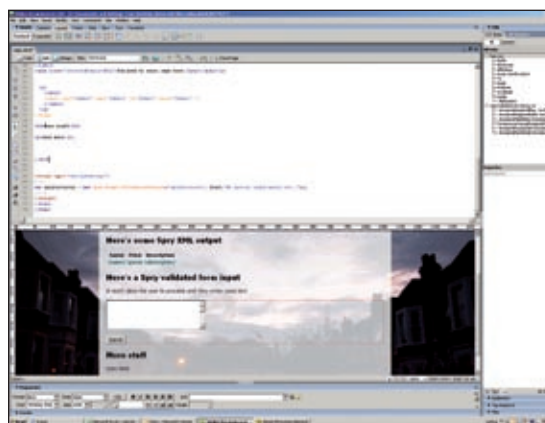
Most of the changes made to the software itself are equally conservative. The main workspace is largely unchanged from Dreamweaver 8, with options to use a WYSIWYG design view, a text view for editing source code or a split view that displays one above the other. The quality of page rendering in the design view is impressive. It managed to draw one of our test pages, with a CSS-positioned layout and transparent PNG background, more accurately than Internet Explorer 6.

One of the key new features of Dreamweaver CS3 is its support for the Adobe Spry framework. Spry is a set of Javascript libraries that give easy access to AJAX-like functions without the need to write your own JavaScript code. It offers Widgets, including JavaScript form validation and layout

tools; transitions, including fades and sliding-off screen effects; and a method for interfacing with XML data. Some of the transition effects look good if used very sparingly, but the Widgets are more useful. These include tools for building accordion page layouts, where clicking on a header causes a related content frame to slide open in the browser, and tabbed panels. If you add Spry elements in design view, Dreamweaver handles the underlying code effortlessly. It inserts the relevant links into the page header, and even ensures that the libraries themselves are added to the site. The appearance of Spry elements can be altered using CSS.

The Spry XML data tool has the potential to be more useful still, as it allows designers to incorporate external data with no programming and no use of server-side technologies such as PHP or ASP. One tool allows you to connect a data source, such as an XML file stored on the remote server, and another allows you to output data as a table automatically.

Dreamweaver CS3 integrates neatly with Adobe Photoshop CS3, the



▲ The Spry XML tool allows you to incorporate external data into your site without the need for ASP or PHP

Extended version of which is included in the Web Premium package. You can now copy all or part of an image in Photoshop, then paste it straight into a Dreamweaver layout, with the software prompting you to set compression and format options as you do so. Dreamweaver also includes a new tool called Device Central CS3, which allows you to preview the way that your pages will look on mobile devices such as smartphones. It includes emulation for the different versions of Flash Lite used on mobile devices, making it even more useful if you also develop using Flash CS3.

Adobe's Dreamweaver CS3 may not be a revolutionary update, but it's still the best environment for developing websites visually. Visual designers should consider the CS3 Web Premium suite, which also includes Photoshop Extended CS3 and Illustrator CS3.

Tom Royal

SUMMARY

- ✓ New Spry XML tools are impressive
- ✓ Great for coding and designing
- ✗ Overly complicated for home users

WEB-DESIGN SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP/Vista, 512MB RAM, 1GB disk space
PART CODE 38040333
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.adobe.co.uk

Also consider...

MICROSOFT Encarta Reference Library 2007

★★★★★

£28 inc VAT

BEST BUY Encarta is the best encyclopedia you can get for your PC. It's easy to search and illustrates a lot of its entries with multimedia items that really help kids learn. Its articles are quite short, but external links take you to more in-depth content. It provides a stunning balance of facts and fun.

ENCYCLOPEDIA Requires 600MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 850MB disk space PRODUCT CODE 83012047
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.microsoft.com
✓ Friendly interface and excellent multimedia ✗ Lacks depth in some articles FULL REVIEW Jan 2007



MR SITE Takeaway Website

★★★★★

£30 for the first year; £2.49 per month from then on

BEST BUY Takeaway Website is everything you need to build your own website. Its price includes hosting for a year, a domain name and a website design package. There are templates for creating blogs, guest books, feedback forms and galleries, which makes this perfect for the beginner.

WEBSITE-CREATION SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP, Internet Explorer 6 SUPPLIER www.mrsite.com DETAILS www.mrsite.com ✓ Excellent value; powerful site creation tools ✗ Style options are limited FULL REVIEW Apr 2007



DISKEEPER Diskeeper 2007 Home

★★★★★

£24 inc VAT

BEST BUY Over time your hard disk can get untidy, with fragments of files spreading across the entire disk. Diskeeper 2007 puts them all back together again, improving disk performance. It does all this behind the scenes, so once you've configured it you'll never have to go near it again.

It's not the most exciting application, but it's essential for a smooth-running PC.

DEFRAGMENTATION SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP. Maximum drive size 768GB SUPPLIER www.diskeeper.com DETAILS www.diskeeper.com ✓ Efficient defragmentation ✗ Not worth upgrading from previous version FULL REVIEW Mar 2007



MICROSOFT Virtual PC 2007

★★★★★

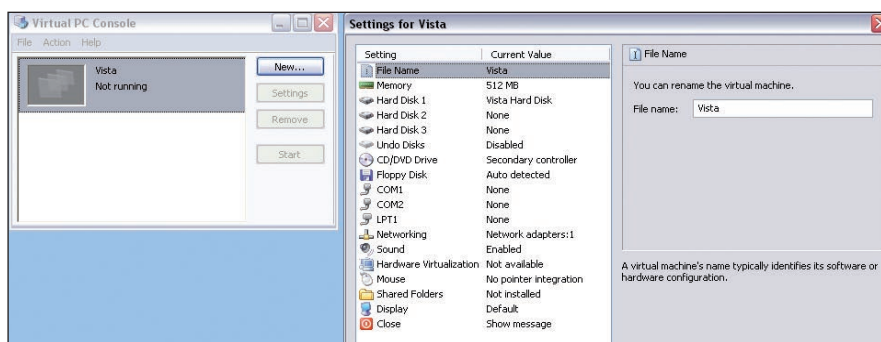
Free

The ease with which websites and web applications can run on any computer has made the hardware-specific approach of operating system companies such as Microsoft and Apple look a little outdated. No wonder, then, that they're both increasingly keen on virtualisation technology. Apple will include BootCamp, which allows Mac users to run Windows on their machines, with the next version of Mac OS X, and Microsoft has made the 2007 version of its Virtual PC software available for free download.

Virtual PC 2007 is compatible with every version of Windows from 98 onwards, and can also work with DOS. As you'd expect from Microsoft, it works well with Vista and not with Linux, so it isn't as good as InnoTek's free VirtualBox (*What's New*, May 2007).

When you first launch Virtual PC 2007 you're presented with a console that lists your virtual machines and allows you to create new ones.

Creating a new virtual machine is done using a familiar Windows wizard. When creating a virtual machine, you allocate



▲ The Virtual PC console isn't as smooth as InnoTek's Virtual Box software, but it is easy to use

memory and hard disk space. The console also lets you add optical drives and networking options, which worked well. Our Windows XP test machine uses a wireless LAN connection to the internet, and Virtual PC had no trouble making this available for the virtual machines.

A virtual machine can run either in a window or fullscreen. When windowed, Virtual PC 2007 has a range of icons that show when the virtual system is accessing system resources such as the

hard disk and optical drive. As with the console interface, this area of Virtual PC doesn't quite have the same finesse as VirtualBox; there's no onscreen reminder of the hotkey for alternating between control of the virtual machine and control of the host OS, for instance.

We tested Virtual PC using the Home Premium version of Vista; it seemed to take longer to install than on VirtualBox, but once the installer had finished the OS ran fine, although performance will really depend on the amount of memory you dedicate to it. Networking and sound worked well, although you can't enable the flash Aero desktop, as Virtual PC, like VirtualBox, doesn't emulate a 3D graphics card.

Annoyingly, Virtual PC lacks VirtualBox's USB support, although it does have a very cool trick up its sleeve: it supports the drag and drop of files from the virtual machine to the host, and vice versa. It's a killer feature, and will make it very easy to use Virtual PC to run old software and access the data on newer systems. For Windows-based operating systems, Virtual PC 2007 is a great application, but VirtualBox 2007 has better support for other operating systems.

Alex Watson

SUMMARY

- ✓ Drag and drop to/from virtual machine
- ✓ Simple configuration
- ✗ Linux support not very good

VIRTUAL MACHINE SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP/Vista, 400MHz processor, 512MB RAM PART CODE N/A
SUPPLIER www.microsoft.com
DETAILS www.microsoft.com

SONY Sound Forge 9

★★★★★

£210 inc VAT

Most music- and video-production software is non-destructive, with raw media files stored separately from project files that combine them on a timeline, complete with edits and effects. Sound Forge is a destructive editor in that it makes permanent changes to the original files. The increasing sophistication of non-destructive editors means that Sound Forge isn't the essential tool it once was, but there are still plenty of jobs for which its approach is preferable, such as creating sound effects and samples, audio restoration and preparing mixes for CD (known as mastering). It can also open video files and edit their audio component.

Sound Forge has always been extremely quick and precise, thanks to lightning-fast waveform redraws and straightforward tools for truncating, fading and pitch-shifting. Sony has made some alterations to the core editing tools in version 9, though. Selections are made by dragging across the waveform, but now it's possible to drag and drop selections to different parts of a file or to

another file. At first we couldn't work out why it only worked some of the time, and at other times served only to create a new selection. We finally worked out that the dragging action must start with a vertical mouse movement. After this, the feature proved an effective timesaver, but it seems at odds with Sound Forge's otherwise straightforward operation. The rules for how to select and delete sections of a single channel have changed too, and again, it took us some time to fathom their intricacies.

Other new features are more welcome. Sound Forge finally supports surround sound, including quadraphonic (4.0), 5.1 and 7.1 formats, and can save 5.1 mixes in Dolby Digital format at a fixed 448Kbit/s. Support for up to eight audio channels per file also provides scope for basic multi-track audio editing, which is particularly welcome for sound design. When processing part of an audio file, it's now possible to define crossfade times between the effected and non-effected areas to give smooth transitions.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Mastering-quality plug-ins
- ✓ Precise and efficient editing tools
- ✗ Changes may frustrate existing users

AUDIO-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000 SP4/XP/Vista, 900MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 150MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.sub.co.uk
DETAILS www.sonycreativesoftware.com



▲ The new Mastering Effects Bundle means that Sound Forge is fully equipped for audio CD mastering

The best new feature is the Mastering Effects Bundle, a quartet of plug-ins from iZotope covering equalisation, multi-band compression, reverb and brick-wall limiting. The sound quality is far higher than that of the existing Sony plug-in collection or those included with Sound Forge's main competitor, Steinberg Wavelab. Along with the bundled copy of CD Architect, Sound Forge now includes everything you need to turn a collection of raw mixes into an audio CD that's ready for duplication.

We like some new features in version 9 more than others, but we suspect it won't take long for us to get used to the interface tweaks. At this price, Sound Forge's fast, precise editing tools can't be beaten, and the vastly improved plug-in bundle adds considerable value to the package.

Ben Pitt